

'Print is not dying. It is changing'

The impending death of print refuses to come (thankfully) as indie publications continue to launch in the pandemic, challenging a nose diving economy and digital boom

JANE BORGES

WHEN the Dirty magazine launched its first print edition in January this year, the question its founder-editor Kshitij Kankaria was asked more than once was "Why?" "Many were amused that I was bothering with a print magazine, when publications were shutting down the world over. They thought that it was a clear formula to fail."

Kankaria felt otherwise. "In India, we mostly have publications that cater to the masses. Many of these were hit, even before the pandemic of 2020. Dirty was always intended for a niche audience. I knew from Day 1 that our success wasn't going to be determined by the number of copies sold, or how many minds we could satisfy with our content," he shares over a telephonic chat. He feels that what's not worked for most mainstream magazines, especially fashion, is that they aim to cater to the masses, but their content continues to be niche. "It's

a clear two-way path that they [publications] are trying to take at the same time. In a country like India, where a mass person watches a Salman Khan film and a niche person, something more cerebral, you can't sell the same product to both."

It's one of the reasons why Kankaria feels Dirty is different. Priced at 19 Euros (₹1,700 approx), the magazine costs as much as a coffee table book. The biannual publication caters to Indian readers all over the world. Kankaria, who has been working as a stylist and creative director for more than five years in Mumbai, felt there was a huge gap in the way the fashion and culture of India was being portrayed. "It was made to look glamorous and sexy to attract consumers. I thought it was more attention-seeking than anything. I wanted to showcase something that was more real and Indian, one not driven by agendas." The indie fashion-cultural-people magazine, as Kankaria likes to describe it, has managed to travel



Tarini Sethi, editor of the soon-to-launch The Irregular Times, a tabloid-sized art and design quarterly, hopes to revive colouring pages, recipes, and agony aunt columns, which were formerly part of many popular publications



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through word of mouth. Nearly 40 bookstores have also subscribed to it, across the globe. "Our first cover looked so different [from what's available in the market]. For me, the sight value plays an important role, especially when it comes to the first issue." The publication will also be launching its own website by the end of this month, from where a copy can directly be purchased.

Though last year brought a lot of bad news for the magazine industry the world over—the Indian print industry alone, faced an estimated loss of ₹12,500 crore, according to Indian Newspaper Society (INS)—the growing number of new independent print publications is probably proving that the oft repeated notion that it's the end of the road for print, is misleading.

Professor Samir Husni, founder of the University of Mississippi's Magazine Innovation Center at the School of Journalism and New Media, recently revealed that though the number of new print magazines launched in the US dropped by half to 60 in 2020, compared to 139 a year earlier, "the pace of new launches accelerated in the second half of the year with food, home and fitness titles proving the most popular". This, he says was nothing short of a miracle, especially when the country was grappling with its worst-ever health-crisis. "Print is neither dead nor dying. Print is changing," Husni says, in an email interview to mid-day. "Keep in mind that print is a very

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Tarini Sethi, editor,
The Irregular Times

good technology, a 500-plus year technology that needs no charging, no batteries, no outlets."

What's changing for print magazines is the nature of the publication. "In the 1980s and '90s, specialisation was the in-thing. It was what we can call today as general specialisation, such as food, health, television and movies. Now, we are witnessing the age of ultra-specialisation. So, in food we have magazines only for the plant-based-food; in health, we have magazines for the pandemics or different type of illnesses; in television and movies we have magazines dedicated to Star Wars, Star Trek, and SVU," he says, citing the trends in the US market.

Tarini Sethi is the editor of the soon-to-launch The Irregular Times, a tabloid-sized quarterly, which she says will be India's first art and design newspaper. It all began around five years ago, when Sethi started a zine collective comprising the work of artists from around the world, which she'd then showcase at different places. The aim, she says, was to educate young Indians about the analogue zine culture.

When she launched The Irregulars Art Fair in 2017, which was an attempt to make the art market more egalitarian, Sethi ensured zines were very much part of that conversation. "We got our participating artists to make small zines about their work, be it their sculptures or paintings. I do understand that if someone is in college or earns a small salary, they can't afford to buy art." But zines, she feels, became an excellent means for young viewers to purchase the participating artist's creation. The Irregular Times evolved from a similar space. "We wanted people to enjoy the sensory aspect of a newspaper. Everyone is experiencing digital saturation. That's all we have been doing for the last one year—we are either on Zoom meetings, or on Instagram or Netflix. Some of us even sleep in front of the laptop."

The new publication is an attempt to bring back the good-old joys of reading a magazine or a newspaper, which would be peppered with interviews, storytelling, colouring pages, recipes, and agony aunt columns. "We also wanted to make it more interactive. For instance, in the first issue we will be

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Goa-based Orijit Sen, Aniruddha Sen Gupta and Francesca Cotta have come together to start Comixense Magazine, a comics quarterly magazine for high school students



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teaching readers how to make a zine. Even if it is just for an hour, we want people to shut their laptops and phones, and pore over a physical newspaper and experience this activity," says Sethi, who will start with a modest print run of 2,000 copies.

A similar motivation led Goa-based Orijit Sen, Aniruddha Sen Gupta and Francesca Cotta to join hands with educationist Sanjiv Kumar and his team at Ektara Trust to start Comixense Magazine, a comics quarterly magazine for high school students, launched last month. "As a comics maker, I have always believed that print is the natural home for comics. But, we were able to take the idea forward because Sanjiv came to me with this proposal, saying he wanted to start a magazine for school-going children," says Sen, who is a veteran in the field of graphic art. "The pandemic I feel is a good time to start a print magazine, because now young people are being forced into spending more time in front of the screen. Sanjiv [also] felt that perhaps there was a need to come up with material that would wean them away from their phones. I kind of agreed with him."

That Kumar already brings out a couple of children's magazines, and had a user base of 5,000 children, because of the schools he is associated with, made them feel more confident to kick-start the publication.

But Sen feels that for any magazine that intends to sustain, content will always remain king. "And, that's really my part of the job, as editor. I need to induce them into reading something that is in print."

Having a complex and challenging narrative was one of the ways, Sen felt that this could be achieved. "Screen reading allows you to only pick up stuff on the surface rather than engaging with it," he says. For instance, in the recently-released issue, there's a story titled the Plague Doctor's Apprentice, which is about the bubonic plague in Florence in the 1630s. "All the visual details of Florence have been well-researched, where we even refer to specific streets and places like the pharmacy Santa Maria Novella from that time, which still exists in the city." They've also introduced a Chinese character—harking back to the slaves brought over from China. "Now, this is not something most people would know. So, when you encounter a young Chinese protagonist in a city like Florence in the 1600s, it's already a challenging proposition that arouses your curiosity, and you'd want to know more about them." At the end of the story, they also give references about the



Brand strategist Shrey Sethi and Rahul Singh Manral, partner and photographer for The Curator Mag, say their publication is ad-free and provides good quality content



pharmacy, and web links for those who'd like to know more.

Shrey Sethi, a brand strategist for The Curator Mag, a biannual art magazine, which launched its first print publication in March this year, says while digital is touted as the next big thing, the tangibility that print allows will remain irreplaceable. "We started out five years ago, as a community effort [on Instagram], where we wanted to showcase the works of upcoming artists, and their exhibitions across India." At some point, the team realised that they wanted to talk about these artists and their

process, but not all art looked appealing on screen. And so, the team started planning their print magazine as early as 2018. With the pandemic throwing a spanner in the works, they were finally able to realise their vision this year. "Although, it is good quality content, we knew we wanted it to be ad-free, and economically priced."

The publication is also looking at incorporating additional plug-ins. "If generally, print allows you to include only two photos due to space limitations, today, if you hover your phone over a printed image, you can access an entire gallery."

Many like Meera Ganapathi, editor-founder of The Soup Magazine, a digital publication, feel that though online is currently most favoured because it can be accessed by a large group of people, if print publications continue to run sensibly, with a mixed model of digital and print, they can be profitable, too. Last year, Soup commemorated its fourth anniversary by publishing some of its stories in a print edition that readers could physically own. "The response was great. All our copies were sold out within two weeks," she says.

Magazine industry analyst Husni admits that the frequency with which magazines are being published has become more scattered. "The weeklies are rare now, and even the monthlies are starting to join the rarity of the weeklies. The frequency of choice today is a quarterly magazine. However, the major change taking place is that magazines are no longer an impulse buy because they are no longer cheap," he says, adding that the average cover price of a magazine at a major bookstore in the US is now \$10 (₹730 approx).

He says that while there has never been anything wrong with print and its use, there has been a glaring problem with the business model. "We had a business model that served us very well for almost a century: create a magazine for the advertiser to use as a vehicle to reach an audience. We were giving the magazines away in order to create customers for the advertisers. That's why the cheap prices of single copy sales and subscriptions. The business model was advertising-driven. [We were] Selling the audience to the advertiser, and it worked great then," says Husni.

Now, with the ads migrating to digital and to direct advertising via text messaging and emails, the model is changing to "selling content to the audience rather than selling the audience to the advertiser". "Magazines in India, like the rest of the world, were, are, and will continue to be an invited trusted friend that should offer you information you can't easily find on Google. This friend is a curator, who vetts the information, searches for the information, and provides it to you on a silver platter—it's something that the audience will appreciate and is willing to pay for."

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Over the moon

A 20-year-old Pune-based astrophotographer has captured a rare moment of the International Space Station passing by the moon that has stunned astronauts too



ADITYA
KINJAWADEKAR

CYNERA RODRICKS

WHO doesn't enjoy gazing at a clear sky dotted with thousands of stars and a bright, shining moon? While we gaze in awe, Aditya Kinjawadekar, 20, from Pune, is perfecting the art of capturing these fleeting moments with his camera.

Kinjawadekar, who is currently pursuing electronics and telecommunication engineering at Pune University, describes himself as an amateur astrophotographer. But, if you browse through the pictures on his Instagram (@deep-sky_wonders), you will realise he is just being modest, when he calls himself an "amateur". "I've been interested in astronomy since I was a child, and I used to spend a lot of time watching shows related to it on TV. But, I only became seriously invested in it about four years ago, when I joined the Jyotirvidya Parisanstha (JVP), India's oldest association of amateur astronomers, and now volunteer at the same," he says. He started pursuing astrophotography about two years ago, and has been photographing space ever since.

While Kinjawadekar already has a large collection, he was able to add a rare click to it recently, when he photographed the International Space Station (ISS), as it travelled past the moon. The ISS is a space laboratory that orbits the Earth 400 km above the Earth's surface.

"It occasionally passes in front of the moon or the sun, which is referred to as a transit. A transit like this is extremely rare, and the ISS completes the transit in less than half a second. One such transit occurred on November

30, 2020, and it was visible from the outskirts of Pune [near the Khadakwasla dam], and I was able to capture it," Kinjawadekar explains. He, however, only recently shared the image on his Instagram.

To capture this image, he used a telescope and a mirrorless camera capable of shooting high-frame-rate videos at a high resolution. The location for this shot was crucial, and even if he had missed it by 500 metres, he probably would not have been able to get it shot. To capture this moment, he used a Skywatcher 6" reflector telescope mounted on an EQ3-2 mount and a Sony A7iii camera.

Kinjawadekar usually travels to Pune's outskirts to pursue his passion. "Because I live in Kothrud, which has a high level of light pollution, doing astrophotography from home is a nightmare, so I usually try to travel outside the city to take astrophotos. I've attempted to click a transit like this every time it appears near my location, but I've only been successful once in three attempts. I also seek assistance from websites that notify you of such events in your specific location," he says. In the past, he has also captured images of distant galaxies and nebulae that are millions of light years away and extremely faint.

While this recent image is a clear winner in his astrophotography collection, what makes it even more special is that one of the astronauts, Thomas Pesquet, who is currently on the space station, saw it and commented on his Instagram post. "That was the icing on the cake," he admits.

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The ISS photographed as it travelled past the moon. PIC COURTESY/ ADITYA KINJAWADEKAR

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